

***Harmony of the Spheres –
Regarding Nature and the Moral Life from Pythagoras to Zhuangzi***

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Hyun Höchsmann

Love of Nature and Love of Knowledge

How ceaselessly heaven revolves! How constantly it abides at rest! And do the sun and moon contend about their respective places? ... Is it, perhaps, that there is some secret spring, in consequence of which they cannot be but as they are? Or is it perhaps that they move as they do, and cannot stop of themselves? (*Zhuangzi* 15)¹

Love of nature and love of knowledge were simultaneous in the early Greek natural philosophers, the Pre-Socratic thinkers of the sixth century BCE, and the Daoist philosophers, Laozi (ca. 600 or 500 BCE)² and Zhuangzi (ca. 365-290 BCE). Zhuangzi expresses his astonishment at the revolution of the heavens, the stillness of the earth, and the order of constellations. He does not postulate a first cause or an uncaused cause or a prime mover. This approach of seeking the explanation of natural events in the natural domain is comparable to that of the Pre-Socratic thinkers.

Thales (ca. 624-545 BCE), whom Aristotle regarded as the first philosopher of nature, predicted the solar eclipse in 585 BCE and heads the list of the Seven Sages of the Greeks of the sixth century BCE. The Pre-Socratic thinkers turned to nature in wonder and sought to study the ultimate structure of reality. The Pre-Socratic and the Daoist philosophers were noted for their disinterest in worldly goods, wealth and power. When Anaxagoras (ca. 540-428 BCE) was criticized for neglecting his family relations and his country, he pointed to heaven and replied, “There is my country.” “I would rather discover a single cause than to become the king of Persia,” (DK 68 B118)³ said Democritus (ca. b. 460). It is recorded that Heraclitus (fl.500 BCE) resigned the hereditary rulership to his brother. When Pythagoras (ca. 571-497 BCE) was asked why he lived, he replied, “To look at heaven and nature.” Pythagoras also remarked that life is like a festival. Some come to compete and others to trade, but the best are those who stand apart

to observe: in life the multitude rush toward fame and wealth but the philosopher stands apart to seeks truth. Laozi stands aside with Pythagoras regarding the banquet of life.

The multitude of men look satisfied and eased, as if enjoying a full banquet, as if mounted on a tower in spring. I alone seem listless and still, my desires having as yet given no indication of their presence (*Dao De Jing* 20).

Laozi stands apart from the multitude; his mode of life and thought are not the ways of the world which is taken in by all that glitters on the surface. Without an awareness of one's desires, one would make no demands on the world or generate conflicts of interest. The world is still an undifferentiated continuum without individuation. All beings are regarded equally.

In their emphasis on independence and freedom Laozi and Zhuangzi have a deep affinity with the Pre-Socratics. As a defender of individual freedom against the imposition of authority and tradition, Zhuangzi is unparalleled. Zhuangzi would have agreed with Democritus that the knowledge of nature is more desirable than the rule of an empire. On more than one occasion he declined with blunt rebuttals invitations from rulers to serve as an advisor in high office. In response to an offer from a ruler, Zhuangzi responds: "Go away quickly, and do not soil me with your presence. I prefer the enjoyment of my own free will." Zhuangzi values freedom, "abiding alone" and "enjoying oneself in the illimitable" more highly than honour, political power or wealth. In Zhuangzi the standpoint of nature provides an impartial and a common perspective from which individual actions may be examined and leads to a universal point of view in ethics. To act ethically we need to know the nature of the world amidst which we live.

The Pre-Socratic philosophers' love of nature and their desire to know its inner workings, not for the sake of the exploitation of nature for human ends but for its own sake, laid the foundations of philosophical and scientific enquiry. Nature is valued as a source of knowledge, and purposive human action is directed not towards the world of man's making but towards the world as it exists.⁴ The Pre-Socratics were pioneers in philosophical thought and the scientific approach to the universe in significant ways. They embarked on a new way of enquiry via reason and observation instead of relying on tradition and revelation. They sought the laws which explain the constituents of the physical universe in terms of physical events and elements without

appealing to supernatural forces, or gods who hurl thunderbolts from the sky. The Pre-Socratic philosophers, (*physiologoi*), studied nature and believed that there was regularity in nature (*physis*) and that human reason (*logos*) can come to understand the natural order.

With the belief that the universe was governed by natural laws Pre-Socratic philosophers began to postulate that beneath the ever-changing natural world there is an unchanging process of reality. Thales reasoned that the fundamental substance was water and concluded that all things originated in water. Anaximander (ca. 610-546 BCE) maintained that the source of all things was “the indeterminate” (*apeiron*). Anaximenes (fl. 545 BCE) made air the foremost concept in understanding ultimate reality, while Anaxagoras (500-428 BCE) claimed that it was mind (*nous*). Pythagoras believed that mathematical relations explained the fundamental order in nature. Heraclitus likened the world-order (*kosmos*) to fire and emphasized the contrary dynamic forces which are continuously changing.

The Pre-Socratic thinkers are recognized as having provided the first systematic philosophy of nature in the West, but the connection between their philosophy of nature and ethics has received less attention. There are clear indications from antiquity that they were actively engaged in ethical matters. In the conception of the universe and its workings, the Pre-Socratic thinkers incorporated ethical ideas and principles. Democritus (fl. 420 BCE), who put forward the doctrine of atoms as constituting the ultimate stuff of reality, wrote extensively on the subject of moral life and emphasized the calm spirit in relation to *eudaemonia*, well-being, anticipating the central themes of Stoic ethics. Anaxagoras introduced the idea of independent and autonomous mind or intelligence (*nous*): “Mind is infinite and self-ruling, and is mixed with no thing, but is alone by itself.”⁵ Extant texts of Heraclitus contain moral theses; it is reported that Heraclitus’ book *On Nature* contained discourses on the universe, politics and theology. Diodorus, a Stoic teacher of Cicero, argued that Heraclitus’ philosophy “is not about nature, but about government, and the remarks about nature have an illustrative function.”⁶ Heraclitus has been spoken of as the first Greek moral philosopher by scholars, and ethical theory is thought to be “the summit of Heraclitus’ thought,” even as most recent discussions expend “many more words on the

metaphysical foothills” entranced by his oracular epigrams.⁷ Thales’ activities as statesman, engineer, and astronomer are recorded by Herodotus.⁸ Parmenides (fl. 485 BCE) was known for his political wisdom. It is reported that Parmenides worked to “arrange his country by excellent laws, so that the citizens still make their officials swear each year to abide by the laws of Parmenides.”⁹

Regard of Nature in Pre-Socratic and Daoist philosophy

The sense of oneness with nature or the continuum of individual life with all forms of life and the movements of the planets is shared by the early Greek natural philosophers and the Daoist thinkers. But there is also a significant difference. Having conceived the order of the universe as endowed with an inherently moral nature and embodying law (*nomos*) and justice (*dike*), the Pre-Socratic philosophers’ regard of nature developed primarily as an intellectual enquiry. The Pre-Socratic philosophers studied nature for itself; the knowledge of nature and its inner workings was their aim. The Daoist philosophers, on the other hand, turned to nature as a source of moral inspiration. With Laozi and Zhuangzi, nature is regarded primarily from the moral point of view. Zhuangzi investigates the workings of nature to draw moral meaning. In the *Dao De Jing*, there is an identification of nature with virtue. The way of nature is the way of virtue for man.

The Pre-Socratic view that to live in harmony with the whole of nature requires knowledge of the workings of the universe and the myriad forms of life is fully developed into a vigorous ethical standpoint of action in Zhuangzi. The ideal of being in harmony with the whole nature has permeated the philosophical thought and moral life of China. Zhuangzi was the first philosopher who has illustrated how the sublime in nature leads to moral empathy with all forms of life. The theme of virtue as keeping what is natural is noteworthy. The ethical goal set forth by the diverse philosophical traditions in China envisages the harmony of the spheres of nature and human activity. Philosophy of nature in China is from the very beginning concerned with deriving a pattern of moral life from an all-encompassing regard for nature. In the philosophy of nature in China there are two aspects in which nature is connected to morality. Nature is a source of

morality: we derive the pattern of moral conduct from the pattern of nature. Nature is a realm of moral action: we are to act to bring about harmony with all forms of life in nature. The first concerns the origin and justification of ethical principles and values; the second concerns the goal and the field of action in ethics. In the area of practical ethics the second aspect leads to global justice and environmental ethics. The goal of living in harmony with all of nature is emphasized in Confucian, Daoist and Neo-Confucian philosophy. To regard things not in isolation but in relation to nature and other living beings marks the distinctive outlook of Daoist and Neo-Confucian philosophy.

The *Dao* of Laozi and Zhuangzi

The *Dao* that can be expressed is not the eternal *dao*.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name (*Dao De Jing* 1).

The *dao* is not subsumed in what is the greatest, nor is it ever absent from what is least.
Therefore it is to be found complete and embodied in all things. In its vastness, it enfolds all things (*Zhuangzi* Book 13).

The *dao* is the most significant concept in the history of philosophical thought in China. The concept of the *dao* is not easily explained. Literally it means, “way,” “path,” or “road.” The symbol seems to have at first stood for the astronomical course of the stars. Given the aesthetic ideal of suggestiveness that has shaped the way of thought and life in China, the philosophical discourse on the subject of the *dao* has fostered subtlety and refinement rather than clarity. Philosophers who pondered on the *dao* have enriched the concept of *dao* and created new constellations of meaning. The meaning of the *dao* remains as elusive as the course of the stars.

Searching for one fundamental principle which will explain the world, Laozi in the *Dao De Jing* concludes that the highest ultimate principle is beyond observable, definable existence and is beyond experience: it eludes all familiar forms of thinking. Laozi calls this ultimate reality the “*dao*.” The *dao* stands for the origin of all things, an impetus giving rise to every form of life and motion.¹⁰ The *dao* in the universe is the “primal unity” underlying apparent multiplicity. *Dao De Jing* consists of eighty-one short verses (five thousand characters) ranging from speculations about the origin of the universe and the concept of *dao* governing all life and nature to a formulation of a benevolent, in contrast to a retributive, view of justice.¹¹ Most importantly, it

puts forward the moral ideal of living in harmony with the whole of the universe.

The *dao* is eternal and present everywhere. *De*, virtue, is the operation of the *dao* (*Dao De Jing* 51). When combined with *de*, virtue, the *dao* represents the essential ordering principle within nature, society and the individual. The *dao* is aligned with *de* not in the sense of the contrary of vice but as a latent power inherent in all forms of life.

There is a parallel between Thales' view that all things are full of gods and Laozi's and Zhuangzi's view that all things are endowed with the *dao*. Thales' thesis can be interpreted as asserting that the whole of the world manifests a power of change and motion which is permanent, pervasive and inherent in the world itself.

From the most minute to the grandest, there is nothing in which the *dao* does not inhere. For Thales and Zhuangzi the world itself is permeated with the life force: every individual entity is endowed with the power which makes it what it is. There is a further parallel between Thales' view that everything is made of water and water as the symbol of the *dao* in Laozi and Zhuangzi. Water is the ubiquitous symbol of the *dao* as the process of reality, which is present in all existing things from the minutest to the greatest. The *dao* of Laozi is symbolized by the quietly flowing water which surpasses all in time by steadfastly enduring.

The highest excellence is like water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving, the low place which all men dislike. Hence [its way] is near to the *dao* (*Dao De Jing* 8).

The intended significance of Thales' thesis that water is the ultimate substance (*arche*) might be that water is essential for plant and animal life. It is generally assumed that Thales thought water to be the substance or "stuff" which constitutes all things, and coherent interpretation can be given to this view. Whether substance or process, why does Thales embark on the search for one original source to explain the multitude of phenomena? In Thales, Laozi and Zhuangzi there is a common philosophical impulse to seek unity among multiplicity in order to discover the process of the ultimate reality. A comparative study of the Pre-Socratic and Daoist thinkers reveals not incidental similarities but a shared underlying world-view: that there is a coherence and unity of the substance and process of reality. The metaphysical conception of the *dao* as the ultimate

reality has an affinity with the Pre-Socratic idea of reality as the processes of being in Parmenides and becoming in Heraclitus.

Parmenides and Laozi – Being and *Dao*

Parmenides and Laozi ponder about the origin of Being and *dao* and arrive at a parallel conclusion regarding the ultimate reality – enduring, constant and ever present. Parmenides, taking the same metaphor of a road as the philosophers of the *dao*, relates the approaches to the underlying reality.¹²

A single story of a road is left – that it is.
And on it are signs very many in number – that, being, it is ungenerated and undestroyed,
whole, of one kind and motionless, and balanced.
Nor was it ever, nor will it be; since now it is, all together one, continuous.
For what generation will you inquire out for it?
How, whence, did it grow?
Neither from what is not will I allow you to say or think;
for it is not sayable nor thinkable that it is not (DK 28 B8).

The Being of Parmenides and the *dao* of Laozi are the processes of reality which are ungenerated, imperishable and are ever-present in all that exists. Of the *dao* it is said,

I do not know whose son it is. It seems to be earlier than God (*Dao De Jing* 4).

Having no beginning, there was no time when Being and *dao* were not. The signs are many, the story one and the road of which it speaks, one. Regarding the origin of existence or Being itself, there remains one story of the road, the process of Being, which comprises of signs indicating the various approaches to what the road was. Similarly, the various descriptions of the *dao* capture only aspects and not the whole of the *dao* itself. The celebrated opening of the *Dao De Jing* announces the extent of the *dao* and the limitation of our effort in describing it and the unbridgeable gap between words and what they aim at. The metaphysical conception of the *dao* as the ultimate reality has an affinity with the idea of reality as the processes of being and becoming.

All things are produced by the *dao* and nourished by its outflowing operation (*de*). They receive their forms according to the nature of each, and are completed according to the circumstances of their condition (*Dao De Jing* 51).

Pythagoras and Zhuangzi on the Harmony of the Spheres

The Pythagorean conception of *kosmos* contains the idea of orderly arrangement or structural

perfection and beauty. The universe is a perfect whole, an ordered arrangement in accordance with definite laws. This regularity and order are exemplified in the movement of the heavenly bodies. Pythagoras is thought to be the first to call the world *kosmos*, “from its inherent order.” By studying this order we reflect it in our own souls. This is analogous to drawing a pattern of conduct from the way of heaven in the classical period of philosophy in China from Mozi, Laozi, Confucius and Zhuangzi to Mencius.

Pythagoras’ idea of the harmony of the spheres is amplified in Zhuangzi’s elaboration on the significance of music as an expression of the *dao*. The Pythagoreans believed that the principle of the *kosmos* was harmony. Harmony is the structural aspect of the *kosmos* under its laws which is expressed in relation of parts to the whole.¹³ The Pythagorean conception of harmony is both musical harmony, in the sense of a concord between different sounds, and harmonious mathematical structure based on geometrical rules. The influence of the Pythagorean conception of harmony on all aspects of Greek life was far reaching. In sculpture and architecture as well as in poetry, rhetoric, religion and morality the Greeks upheld that human activity was governed by the rule of fitness or propriety which, like the rules of justice, could not be transgressed.¹⁴ The harmony of the spheres of individual action and society as a moral goal has resonated across centuries to the present. The direct precursor of Plato’s concept of harmony in the *Republic* is Pythagoras’s harmony of the spheres. Plato puts forth the harmony of the members of the state and harmony in the individual soul as the conditions of justice and happiness.

In Pythagorean cosmology earth, the planets, sun and moon revolve about the centre of the universe.¹⁵ The heavenly bodies in motion produce musical consonances which are inaudible because they are ever present and sound is heard only in contrast with silence. The order in the universe is conceived as arising from the harmony of the elements embodying the music of the spheres. The order and the movements of the celestial sphere are reflected in the pattern of all life below. Music is the expression of the underlying relations in the *kosmos*. Pythagoras believed that the soul must be kept pure; an important means of purification was music.

There is a parallel between Pythagoras’ and Zhuangzi’s views on music. Throughout

Zhuangzi's characterization of the aspirants of *dao*, from the Yellow emperor to Confucius, music has a central place. Zhuangzi explains that music is the activity which links man to heaven.

The perfect music first related to the activities of men and conformed to the principles of heaven. It was aligned with the five virtues and with what is spontaneously apparent in nature (*Zhuangzi* 13).

Zhuangzi's view corresponds to the idea of the harmony of the spheres held by the Pythagoreans. The order and the movements of the celestial sphere are reflected in the pattern of all life below. The existence of the universe is conceived as the harmony of the elements embodying the music of the spheres. Zhuangzi explains that music leads to the *dao* in stages. Music leads to the *dao* not through certainty but through inspiring awe, being all-consuming and sustaining wonder.

Heraclitus, the Philosopher of Flux

All things come into being through opposition and all things are in flux, like a river (DK 22 A 1).

While Pythagoras emphasized the process of reality as ordered harmony, Heraclitus noted its continuous flux. The writings of Heraclitus have been applauded by philosophers as antithetical as Hegel and Karl Popper. In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel exclaims: "Here we see land! There is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my logic."¹⁶ Popper regards Heraclitus as "a thinker of unsurpassed power and originality." Heraclitus' theory of flux can be readily interpreted as a conclusion of a rational procedure. Heraclitus is not positing the flux theory as an *a priori* intuition or a literary fancy but a general thesis about the nature of reality supported by empirical observations.¹⁷ Heraclitus' illustration of the flux theory is drawn from the world of changing phenomena about him: water, heat and cold, dry and moist. Popper ascribes to Heraclitus an ontology of events, picturing Heraclitus a "Greek Wittgenstein" who "visualized the world ... not as a sum total of all things, but as the totality of events, or changes, or facts."¹⁸ Popper explains that Heraclitus was occupied intensively with the problem of change: How is change possible? How can a thing change without losing its identity – in which case it would no longer be that thing which has changed? Heraclitus' answer was that there are no changing things but only changes. Popper argues that for "Heraclitus the truth is to have grasped the essential being of nature, i.e., to have represented it as implicitly infinite, as process in

itself.”¹⁹

War is the father and king of all...(DK 22 B53)

We should know that war is common and strife is justice and that all things happen according to strife and just necessity (DK 22 B80)

These characteristically terse pronouncements of Heraclitus, when taken in isolation, seem to put forward war and strife and not justice or harmony as universal moral principles. “Strife is justice” succinctly encapsulates Heraclitus’ view of the dynamic confrontation between contraries as the corollary of the flux theory: things change into their opposites. Heraclitus seems to confirm the impression that he was an upholder of strife:

We should know that war is common and strife is justice and that all things happen according to strife and just necessity (DK 22 B102).

This simultaneity of contrasting attributes is also emphasized in the *Dao De Jing*.

If all on earth acknowledge the beautiful as the beautiful
Then thereby the ugly is already posited.
If all on earth acknowledge the good as good
Then thereby is the non-good already posited (*Dao De Jing* 2).

These propositions are explicit in maintaining that the beautiful and the good put forward their opposites. The intended significance of these passages is the mutual implication of the contraries evident in all things. The movement of reality Heraclitus and Laozi envisage is dialectical. Not by virtue of harmony but through strife or the bringing together of contraries the process of reality develops.

The Heraclitean theory of strife and flux might appear to be the antithesis of the Pythagorean cosmology of the harmony of the spheres. However, Heraclitus thought that in the process of reality, which is in constant flux, there is an ever-present rational pattern (*logos*).²⁰

Of this *logos*, although it is true for ever, men have no understanding before they hear it and after they first hear it. Although everything happens according to this *logos*, they seem quite inexperienced when they make trial of such words and works as I tell of by explaining each thing according to its own nature and stating how it is (DK 22 B1).

There is measure in accordance with which the contraries are to be balanced.

This world-order (*kosmos*), the same for all, no god or man has made but it always was and is and will be an ever-lasting fire, kindling by measure and going out by measure (DK 22 B30).

Dike is a balance of forces in nature. Morality is conceived as a mean between opposites, a balance and a proper attunement or a harmony of the soul. Heraclitus refers to the world-order simultaneously as “justice” and “harmony.”

The adverse is concordant: from discord the fairest harmony (DK 22 B8).

The process of the world-order is a harmony achieved from strife and conflicting natural elements and forces. The organizing constitutive principle of the physical world creates order from conflict and strife.

For those who are awake the *kosmos* is one and common, but those who are asleep turn aside each into a private *kosmos* (DK 22 B89).

We should not act and speak like men asleep (DK 22 B73).

One should follow the common. But while the *logos* is common, the many live as though they had a private understanding (DK 22 B82).

The somnambulists conjure up private worlds of their own making. Heraclitus’ remarks might startle the subjectivists who are enmeshed in private world of dogmatic slumber.

Heraclitus’ conception of *logos* as the underlying process of reality from which “everything happens” but which eludes understanding and explanation in words resembles the opening theme of the intractability of the *dao* in the *Dao De Jing*²¹ and Zhuangzi’s amplification of the theme. The *dao* and *logos* are processes which create order. In Daoist thought there is also the constancy of the *dao* underlying all transformations. The Heraclitean idea of becoming is emphasized in Zhuangzi’s philosophy as an essential characteristic of reality which undergoes a continuous process of transformation.

Transformation and Constancy in Zhuangzi

The life of things rushes along like a galloping horse. Every movement brings a change, every movement brings a transformation. What should you do? What should you not do? Let the natural transformation take place (*Zhuangzi* 17).

The capacities of things cannot be defined, time never stops, all is in constant flux, and the ends and the beginnings of things are never the same (*Zhuangzi* 17).

Our experience of the natural world brings us into the midst of the continuous change of all things. Both for Heraclitus and Zhuangzi nature is in constant process of transformation. For Zhuangzi nature is boundless – it is a place of continuous transformation. The world of the multitude of phenomena given in ordinary perception is a place of continuous change. As

Zhuangzi observes, time never stops, the human condition is ever changing, and the ends and the beginnings of things never occur twice in the same way. Zhuangzi captures this astonishing variety of natural forms in a metaphor of the bud as it opens:

In the transformation and growth of all things every bud and feature has its proper form; and in this we have gradual maturing and decay, the constant flow of transformation and change (*Zhuangzi* 17).

Human life, as it is for the bud, from birth to death, is a continuous transformation. But for everything that exists there subsists an underlying essence beneath the changes of appearances, its proper form, its individual *dao*. Zhuangzi can be interpreted here as contrasting the appearance and the reality of the *dao*. Transformation and change *show dao*, the way of reality, as it *appears* in our experience. The permanence underlying all change is the real *dao*. In the great chain of being, when all life is seen in the continuum of existence, the boundaries between natural kinds are immaterial. To see that all individualized forms of life arise out of transformation is to put all beyond transformation. In regarding transformation as the perpetual reality of life, Zhuangzi introduces a new way of approaching the *dao* as a dialectical movement from becoming to being. Eternity represents fullness of being, underlying stability; time represents succession of becoming, instability. In Zhuangzi's conception of reality as a process of continuous transformation, individuals are not isolated monads but form a part of the continuum of all that exists. What follows from the knowledge of the process of transformation in all things? Zhuangzi embarks on a search for constancy. Zhuangzi affirms that there is constancy in the *dao*.

Union brings separation; becoming, passing away; sharp corners, files; honour, disparagement; activity, failure; knowledge, plotting; inability, contempt. Where is constancy to be found? ... In the *dao* and its virtue (Book 20).

Zhuangzi's philosophy reveals the becoming and the being of the *dao*. Zhuangzi emphasizes that in the perception of reality as a constant flux of becoming, the continuity of being is presupposed. Zhuangzi describes this constancy as the essential characteristic of "the man of the *dao*."

The true man of the *dao* remains constant throughout all change: death and life are great considerations but they would work no change in him. His judgment is fixed regarding that in which there is no element of falsehood. While all things change, he changes not. The transformations of things are to him the developments prescribed for them, and he keeps fast

hold of the causes of them (*Zhuangzi* 5).

The true man of the *dao* accepts all changes as necessary but remains constant throughout all transformations. For everything that exists there subsists an underlying essence beneath the changes of appearances, its proper form, its individual *dao*. Reality comprises simultaneously the dynamic process of transformation and change and the enduring state of constancy. The simultaneous awareness of constancy and transformation leads to a universal point of view in ethics.

All undergoes transformation, but the moral life of the man of the *dao* is constant. To seek the pivot of the *dao* is the work of the aspirants of the *dao* who remain constant, for they “discern fullness and want and are not moved by success or failure, knowing that all things are in flux.” The understanding of reality as a constant flux and transformation leads to an ethical perspective of regarding the fluctuations of fame, fortune and rank with indifference, and ultimately to the highest happiness.

Freedom, Equality and Development of True Nature

In the Pre-Socratic conception of the universe, if all things move in accordance with the laws toward a definite goal is there freedom of individual action? Freedom and law are not locked in antithesis in the Pre-Socratic view. The Greek conception of law in the realm of nature and in ethics is not one of restraining force but one of enabling formation and development of potentiality.²² Law is thought to be a creative moral power which brings forth the underlying order of the *kosmos* in the enhancement of the individual and the communal life. The laws which determine the goal (*telos*) of each entity and its particular development from potentiality to actuality are not conceived or executed as external constraints but within the context of common activity in constant conjunction with myriad forms of life.

The freedom Zhuangzi affirms is the ability to develop the inherent nature without external constraint. In Zhuangzi, following what is natural is equated with what is genuine or truthful (*Zhuangzi* 31). Recourse to nature as a source of morality does not bind all actions in the domain rigorous necessity of natural law but provides a perspective from which conventions of society

can be evaluated. Zhuangzi upholds freedom and autonomy not bound by the conventions of a particular society. He presents freedom as the ability to perceive, think and act in accordance with one's choice, the absence of constraints from desire or external coercion from conventional moral codes and tyrannical government. What is the value of freedom? Letting all things follow their given nature leads to full development of individuality, authentic existence and the progress of knowledge.

When I regard men as being wise, I am not referring to benevolence or righteousness but simply to their letting their inherent nature follow its course freely (*Zhuangzi* 8).

By following one's given nature Zhuangzi does not mean following individual inclinations and disregarding all else. Zhuangzi is not a champion of anarchy of feeling and individual will. For Zhuangzi autonomy is the first stage of freedom of the individual. The second stage is to extend this freedom to all beings. Zhuangzi regards nature as a continuum of myriad forms of life. He regards intellectual and moral autonomy as the basis of wisdom; only those who are free in their perception and judgment can arrive at moral and intellectual virtue.

Those who aspire to live authentically seek an understanding of life around them and do not withdraw into the mountains or to the seashore. Zhuangzi sets forth the freedom of individuals and seeking the common point of view as simultaneous goals and envisages the possibility of the flourishing of individual natures and achieving harmony with all forms of life. Zhuangzi values not only freedom from constraints of conventions and rules but also freedom of thought and action vital for authentic existence and self-development. He presents freedom as a "forecast of capacity,"²³ awakening us to the enduring reality of moral ideals of equality and freedom in human life.

The Universal point of view in Pythagoras and Zhuangzi

Now the world is a place for all things in their unity. When all achieve this unity and regard themselves equally as part of it, they will see their limbs and bodies as dust and soil (*Zhuangzi* 21).

The world is seen from the perspective of all things in unity, not from the point of human dominance over the natural environment. The world is not an arena for the fierce struggle of life and death among aggressors and competitors. In order to achieve unity all need to regard one

another as equal participants. One's own life and death are to be seen not as having a supreme value above all else but as part of the continuous process of the transformation of all forms of life.

Turning to the observation of the world about him, Zhuangzi seeks the connection among diverse forms of life. The moral implication of the elimination of distinctions is the elimination of partiality. Zhuangzi emphasizes the equality and freedom of diverse forms of life in nature. The actions of a moral person "may be extended to ten thousand generations without any [partial love] for any man" (*Zhuangzi* 6). Cultivation of individual virtue and seeing the interconnection of all forms of life are inseparable in Zhuangzi. The beginning of ethics is an awareness that there is a point of view from which the well-being and interests of others are taken into equal consideration. From Zhuangzi's conception of nature as a continuum, a universal ethical point can be derived.

The idea of kinship or sympathy in the *kosmos* and the relation between human beings and other forms of life are at the centre of Pythagoras' ideas on ethics.²⁴ The moral goal Laozi sets forth in the *Dao De Jing*, to perceive the whole of existence as the unity of all that exists, resonates in Pythagoras' ethical regard of kinship with all forms of life. Pythagorean regard of nature leads to an understanding of the interconnectedness of all forms life which forms the basis of extending ethical concerns beyond the domain of the individual's preferences and the confines of subjective experience. The ethical realm of action is not circumscribed by commitment to one's immediate associates. For Laozi ethical life does not consist in vigorous inculcation of the virtues of benevolence and righteousness but in returning to our original goodness (*Dao De Jing* 19).²⁵ Zhuangzi is critical of the shortsightedness of human contrivances which "disrupt the quietness in the mountains and the rivers" and interrupt the round of the four seasons.

The Pythagorean belief in the interconnectedness of all life and Zhuangzi's regard for the natural environment and all life are directly linked to the contemporary moral issues of the protection of the environment as the habitat of sentient life. Contemporary criticisms of biocentrism in environmental ethics which uphold the idea of kinship among human beings and other species of animals were anticipated by the Pythagoreans.

Zhuangzi's affirmation of transformation, equality, and freedom in nature expands the Pythagorean approach to knowledge of *kosmos* as the basis of ethics, giving tangible meaning to the metaphor of the harmony of spheres. Zhuangzi broadens the range of ethical awareness and action to incorporate the entire nature as a realm of moral concern. What we learn from nature is not any specific rule or pattern of conduct but the awareness and understanding of our actions in relation to the events and occurrences in the universe. This leads to empathy with the multitude of phenomena and an approach of friendship with all human beings and the whole of nature. Nature provides an impartial point from which individual actions can be examined and conventions of society can be evaluated. Moral impetus of universal ethics in action is evident in the fields of environmental ethics and global justice.

Following nature and seeking harmony with all things in nature would be incompatible if the way of nature consisted simply of the struggle for survival of the fittest among predators and prey. The alternatives of conquer or perish set forth by Mill are based on a false dichotomy. In the injunction to follow nature there is an underlying belief regarding the possibility of the harmonious co-existence of diverse forms of life. For human beings to follow their inherent nature means recognizing that they are not superior to other forms of life but are part of the continuum of all that exists. Among social beings, actions are not simply motivated by the instinct for self-preservation but also by what is conducive to common flourishing. The moral life of man begins with the search for a harmonious resolution of conflicts, not with seeking the annihilation of what is seen as detrimental to one's own survival. How is the imperative "Bring about harmony with all things in nature" to be put into practice? Pythagoras would join Zhuangzi's moral person, who does not simply emulate nature but actively seeks to incorporate the common existing views into a comprehensive synthesis.

To harmonize the opposing views is the operation of heaven. By following this unlimited process we can complete our life (*Zhuangzi* 2).

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Paul Mustacchio for his ideas on the Pre-Socratics and comments on this paper.

² The dates are traditional. Among contemporary scholars there is a view that Laozi was not a historical individual and that *Dao De Jing* is not a work of one author but a compilation of various sayings.

³ [DK] refers to H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidman, 1956).

⁴ This discussion is drawn from Werner Jaeger, *Paideia, The Ideals of Greek Culture*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 153-4.

⁵ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), pp. 84-85. frag.12, 11, 13, 14. Kirk, G. S. and J. E. Raven, eds. *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 372.

⁶ Diogenes Laertius IX. 15. Quoted in Barnes, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

⁷ Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 59. Joseph Owens, *A History of Ancient Western Philosophy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1960), pp. 160 - 166.

⁸ G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, eds. *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 76.

⁹ Barnes, *op.cit.*, p. 122.

¹⁰ Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power – A Study of the Tao Te Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought* (New York: Grove Press, 1982), p. 51.

¹¹ *Dao De Jing* (literally, “way – virtue – a work of standard authority, a classic”) has been translated as *The Way and Its Power*, *The Book of Tao*, and *The Book of the Way*.

¹² Barnes, *op.cit.*, p. 176.

¹³ Jaeger, *op.cit.*, p. 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁵ G. S. Kirk, “Heraclitus,” *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers*, J. O. Urmson, ed. (London: Hutchinson, 1976), p. 338. W. K. C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962).

¹⁶ Quoted in Barnes, *op.cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations* and Popper, “Kirk on Heraclitus and on Fire as the Cause of Balance,” *Mind* 72, 1963, 386-92.

¹⁹ Quoted in Barnes, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

²⁰ V. Bourke, *History of Ethics*, vol. I (New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 17. Heraclitus, Fragments, 1:2. 45, 50, 72 and 115 in Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*.

²¹ See above p. 12.

²² H. D. F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (London: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 94.

²³ Goethe’s phrase.

²⁴ W. K. C. Guthrie, “Pythagoras,” *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7, P. Edwards, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), p. 37.

²⁵ Paul Mustacchio has observed that this may be related to Plato’s doctrine of knowledge as recollection and to St. Augustine’s *memoria*.